

Bookmasters NYC

The Strand was a legendary bookstore. Do you mean Penn Station? I don't recall a Union Station. :)

Bookmasters may have been gone by the time you lived in NYC. It was right across the street from the Allied Chemical Tower on Broadway facing west. I loved Times Square. It's ruined now, they Disneyfied it. They closed Broadway off and well, it's just ridiculous. I loved the total sleaziness of 42nd Street. It was great and terrifying at the same time. All the porn stores and weird hotels, perfectly captured in Midnight Cowboy. I remember one of my first times going to NYC by myself, I was either 12 or 13, and probably took the bus to Port Authority and walking up 42nd St., and seeing some otherwise looking tough guy wearing lipstick. I was like uh huh. There was a great record store right next to Bookmasters, I can't remember the name anymore, but it was where I first saw Blonde On Blonde on my way to camp, and I didn't buy it 'cause it was gonna be my birthday present a few days later. Total torture. Anyway they had tons of Folkways albums in plain white covers for pretty damn cheap, but I rarely had the money to buy them, but that's where I got the Fugs' first album. The covers were more like the inner sleeve to a vinyl record though they were cardboard, not paper, so you could see the label and know what record it was. The hysterical thing was the Folkways office which was also the Sing Out office was right around the corner on 43rd Street if my memory serves me well, and now I'll bet Moe Asch or someone there had a deal with this particular record store and was selling them albums without the cover under the table. :)

Sam Ash was a music store on Music Row, 48th St, which from 7th Avenue to Sixth Avenue was mostly music stores. It's where I traded my clarinet for a banjo, and several people I know bought guitars there. My favorite store was Manny's. Manny's was lined with autographed 8 X 10s, and they even had one from Bob which was the famous pic on the cover of the Kramer book, where he's wearing the suit and snap tab collar and one hand is covering one eye and he's smiling. He signed it: "To Manny, Keep one eye closed at all cost."

The great thing about NYC back then was they'd have streets that would be the designated street for something and I think it kind of happened organically. 43rd Street was diamond row. There were garment streets in the 20s, and even streets dedicated to brooms. My first real job after I dropped out of school was for some ad agency in the Time and Life Building, a huge fucking agency, NW Ayer who coincidentally started in Philly. I was a mail clerk and they had offices all over Rockefeller Center including the building right across the street which holds Radio City Music Hall and NBC, where one of the guys who ran the elevator was a total pervert. I'd go to

lunch and go to Sam Goody's on 49th Street. I remember buying Phil Ochs, Pleasures of the Harbor and going back to work, and my boss a total moron named Charlie Kelly who now that I think of it was reminiscent of when De Niro plays a moron, says, "Phil Ochs, what's that, Philadelphia Orchestra?" and then let loose with an idiotic laugh and of course for the rest of the day, if not the rest of the week, he had to repeat it 150 times. And also right around the corner was the Brill Building, Tin Pan Alley, though I don't think I knew that then. But one of my favorite New York characters hung out there. In fact Al Kooper starts his book, Backstage Passes talking about this guy. He was the most grizzled guy you ever saw, with a beard and usually wearing a beret and a trench jacket, and he would just stand in front of the Brill Building all day leaning against one of those fire plugs that are built into the building that they only have in New York, smoking a cigar, and growling out "Shithead, scumbag, asshole" all day long. Every time, I was anywhere near there, I'd always walk by to see if he was there and he always was. When I moved back to Philly, there was this lady who would walk around downtown Philly quacking like a duck and she was known as the duck lady. For a short time I had this job in an ice cream parlor on what used to be one of the sleaziest blocks in town. This ice cream parlor had Breyers when it was just a local brand and all kinds of flavors you couldn't get in stores. And the duck lady would come in. Her name was really Sylvia and if you talked to her, she'd stop quacking. I always wanted to take her to NY and introduce her to the Brill Building guy. I figured they'd make the perfect couple. She could quack and he'd answer with "Scumbag, shithead." That ice cream parlor job didn't last too long and I'm sure it was a front for drugs, probably smack or speed. Hardly anyone came in to buy ice cream, but there was a mild stream of people who the manager would come and escort to his office. I was bored out of my mind. I'd go in, and it was like, well I guess I'll make myself an egg cream. Then a couple of hours later, well I guess I'll make myself some exotic milkshake, and then a few hours after that, hmmm, must be time to make the grandest banana split in the history of the planet.